

Question 2: What does the Bible say about itself?

Contributors

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James Dunn was brought up and educated in Glasgow. He graduated MA (in Economics and Statistics), BD from Glasgow (1961, 1964), and PhD from Cambridge (1968), which also awarded him a DD in 1991. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2006. After a year in a parish and two years as Chaplain to Overseas Students in Edinburgh, he became Lecturer in New Testament in Nottingham University in 1970-82, and thereafter the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in Durham (1982-2003). He trained as a minister of the Church of Scotland and served as a local preacher in the Methodist Church for forty years. He is married to Meta and they have three children and seven grandchildren. He has lectured widely at home and abroad and is the author of over twenty volumes and some 200 articles. They have now retired to Chichester to be nearer their daughters and worship at the local parish church.

Tim Ward, at the time of writing, was Associate Director of the Proclamation Trust Training Course in London, UK where he was serving as Acting Director. He was appointed in 2013. Tim previously served a Vicar of Holy Trinity Hinckley. He is married to Erica and they have one son Jonathan. They live in Bromley, Kent where they are active members of Christ Church, Bromley. Tim has written Words of Life and Word and Supplement. In 2016 Tim joined the faculty of Oak Hill Theological College in north London. Among other teaching and pastoral responsibilities, Tim will be seconded as faculty to our new in-context training academy, in partnership with the Acts 29 church-planting network, which will be officially launched in late 2017.

Round 1

Clare Amos

I have tried not to read too closely what James and Tim has written before producing this, but actually I think what I am wanting to say might well be complementary to their approaches.

I found myself wanting to ask the linked question – how exactly does the Bible speak about itself? One answer might be in specific verses reflecting on scriptural authority such as 2 Timothy 3.16. Another could well be on the New Testament's reflection on the Old Testament, which James has looked at in a masterly way.

But perhaps another way – and one which I want to focus on – is its canonical shape and process. James's piece touched on this towards the end but perhaps I want to address it in greater detail. It can be reasonably argued, I believe, that the Bible is speaking to us, and telling us about itself, through the form in which we now have it, and through the history that has led to this shape. I think that perhaps after all one can say 'there is a single subject which has views upon itself' (to quote James). It is interesting how I came to conclude that this was a legitimate way to interpret the

question. It was partly due to a poem written by a friend and former student of mine, Mark Pryce, in a short book on Luke that he, James Woodward and Paula Gooder jointly produced a few years ago. Mark imaginatively wrote in the first person – as Luke’s book – I have put Mark’s poem at the end of this contribution from me. Although I have not been influenced by Mark’s poem in the specific comments I am making, it somehow legitimated for me thinking about ways that the Bible can ‘speak’ other than by specific words and comments in its actual text.

For me one important thing that the Bible says about itself is linked to the fact that there are four Gospels. It speaks strongly to me at this point and through this reality. What is it telling us by the fact that there is Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? I did my fundamental theological studies in the early 1970s at a time when redaction criticism was coming strongly into vogue ... which has now morphed into narrative criticism etc. (I have to confess I have never been able to work out exactly where redaction criticism stops and narrative criticism starts.) And particularly with the advent of the Revised Common Lectionary in which each of the 3 synoptic gospels gets a year each as the main Sunday gospel, I find myself exploring with church congregations the particular insights offered by each of them. I always – and I hope they do too – find it enriching to discover the particular and different insights offered by each evangelist. Their differences – and their agreements – express something of importance for me about the relationship between specific scriptural texts, historicity and the inspiration of scripture.

Perhaps in round two of our discussions I might delve a bit more deeply into that. But at the moment I want to focus more generally on the question of canon criticism – why four Gospels? My professional work over the last few years has been in the field of interreligious dialogue so inevitably I bring that perspective to the table. I have had it said to me by Muslims that the fact that there is one Qur’an is a mark of the superiority and validity of Muslim scripture over against Christian scripture, because there are four Gospels – which don’t always agree with each other. (It is interesting that in Muslim eyes Christian scripture is strongly identified with the Gospels – and what we would call the ‘New Testament’ is often called in Arabic the *injl*) What is the Bible then saying to us about its determination to include four variants of the story of Jesus? We know that to hold on to the four involved quite a battle in the early centuries of the church’s life. In the second century Tatian produced a harmony of the Gospels – the *Diatessaron* or the ‘Mixed Gospel’ ‘*ܩܘܪܕܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ*’ (Ewangeliyôn Damhalltê) which was very popular particularly in Syriac speaking Christianity and which seems to have been preferred for at least a couple of centuries to the four ‘Separated Gospels’ ‘*ܩܘܪܕܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ*’ (Evangeliyon de Mepharreshe). Why was it that those four Gospels eventually won out? I think that the Bible is thus telling us that diversity is important, indeed it has been canonised. But more: since one of the reasons for works such as the *Diatessaron* was to smooth out actual points of disagreement within and between the four gospels, the deliberate choice of the church to allow the four gospels to exist in a sometimes uncomfortable proximity of disagreement with each other (did Jesus cleanse the Temple at the beginning of his ministry, near the end of his ministry, or twice?) does raise for me some questions which need to be answers about whether biblical revelation should be seen in propositional terms. Still continuing with the Christian/Muslim debate, it is interesting that in the Middle Ages the construction of the Gospel of Barnabas, probably by a Christian convert to Islam, was once again seeking to harmonise the Gospels. I work closely these days with Prince Ghazi of Jordan, author of the Muslim *Common Word* document. Though I respect the *Common Word* and Prince Ghazi’s

good intentions, and certainly the use of Christian scripture in a *Common Word* is light years away from the spirit of the Gospel of Barnabas, I still find myself pondering how he has used Christian scripture at one point in a way that seems to me characteristically Islamic. Towards the end of the *Common Word* there is a discussion of a text in which on the surface contains a contradiction between Matthew and Mark/Luke. A *Common Word*'s solution is given below: it draws on 'Blessed Theophylact' a 10th or 11th century obscure Christian figure to provide a solution.

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad. (Matthew 12:30)

For he who is not against us is on our side. (Mark 9:40)

... for he who is not against us is on our side. (Luke 9:50)

According to the *Blessed Theophylact's*^{xxiii} *Explanation of the New Testament*, these statements are not contradictions because the first statement (in the actual Greek text of the New Testament) refers to demons, whereas the second and third statements refer to people who recognised Jesus, but were not Christians.

But I genuinely have to say that given my view that the Bible says that diversity is acceptable I do not find this contradiction troubling. I would be interested to develop this 'canonical' way of the Bible speaking about itself further – in relation to the order of the Gospels, the order of the Pauline Epistles, the comparative ordering of the Tanak/Christian Old Testament, the ambiguity of the canonical place of the Book of Revelation (perhaps ironic given that Rev 21.18-19 does have something very specific to say about itself!) , the place of the Apocrypha, and perhaps even that the 'Bible' as most Christians know it is not read in its original languages. But these are hints for where I might go further.

However another thought – coming also out of my professional interreligious work about the 'voice' of the Bible relates to extensive work I have done on Genesis, and the way that book can be misused in the modern Middle East. A true story I have often told is how shocked I was over an encounter while I lived in Jerusalem with a Palestinian Christian friend of mine – the wife of a local Anglican pastor. My friend had just come from lunch at one of the Christian guesthouses in Jerusalem where she had had a conversation with a Christian woman pilgrim from the west, visiting the Holy Land for a couple of weeks. This visitor on discovering that my friend was a Palestinian Christian living on the West Bank, had informed her quite categorically that 'she couldn't be a real Christian, because if she were a real Christian she would of course have been willing to leave her hometown, since she would know that God had given the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. When I wrote the chapter on Genesis for the *Global Bible Commentary* I concluded with the comment 'To read Genesis properly requires us to stand at a slight distance from the text, and explore it quizzically. It provides questions rather than offering easy answers.' (and more in that vein) I would want to argue that giving us that sense of questioning is a deliberate act of the biblical writers, and could be described as the Bible talking about itself.

And one final observation that does relate to a very specific text. There is one Gospel – that of John – in which we are very specifically told its purpose in John 20.31. And

coming as the climax of the Gospels I think it is an important note that we should not ignore. 'These things are written that you may continue to believe/come to believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and believing have life in its name.' I have regularly treated that purpose statement as referring certainly to John's Gospel as a whole, but given John's privileged place in the Christian canon as a fundamental hermeneutical principle which scripture is offering us as a key to its own interpretation.

Whose book is this?

Whose book is this?

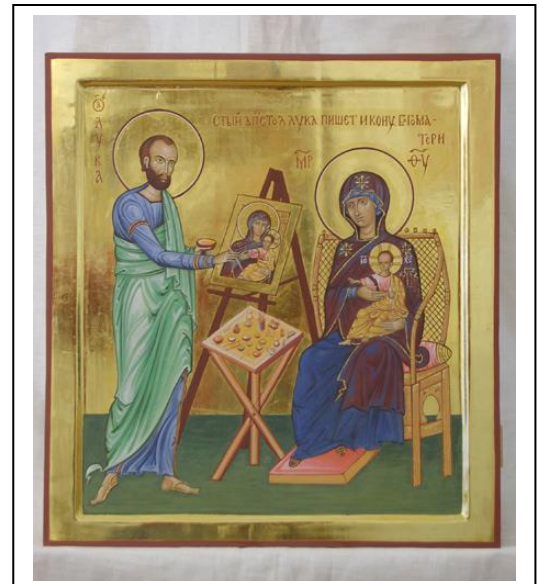
I am the book that Luke wrote: a physician's book.
Lift my cover, and I will show you the anatomy of love:
Feel how my words beat time to the pulse of God's compassion,
How they test God's reflexes: always justice for the poor.

Whose book is this?

I am the book that Luke wrote: a painter's book.
Look at my artistry, and you will see
I draw in letters,
Sketching the face of forgiveness,
Shaping the beauty of grace,
Storying heaven's glory
In the richest, most expensive colours of earth.

Whose book is this?

I am the book that Luke wrote: a generous host's book.
My writing is a feast of welcome, dear Theophilus,
Composed especially for you,
And for each lover of God in every place and time.
Have courage, come in,
Cross the threshold, my friend,
And take the place which Christ has set for you
At the table of joy.



Whose book is this?

I am the book that Luke wrote: a traveller's book.
Turn my pages, walk beside me, crossing land and sea,
And you will trace all the long journeys which a seeker makes
To fetch and carry truth.
(Mark Pryce)

James Dunn

The question itself is intriguing, as though there is a single subject ('the Bible') which has views on itself. As a question it might have become meaningful by the fourth or fifth century (AD), but it could make little sense to Paul and the other NT authors, let alone to the authors of the OT. I only mention this since the formulation of the questions to be examined can be misleading, and may possibly even skew the discussion unhelpfully.

The question, of course, can be reformulated in a number of ways, each of which makes it more meaningful. For example, did the writers of what became the biblical literature think they were writing 'scripture' or its equivalent? The writers of the NT documents certainly regarded what became known to Christians as the *Old Testament* as 'sacred scripture' (*graphê*) – e.g. Mark 12.10; Luke 4.21; John 19.36-37; Acts 1.16. The plural form, 'the scriptures' (*hai graphai*), is regularly used by the Gospel writers to designate the sacred writings of Israel (the OT) as a whole (also Acts 17.2, 11; 18.24, 28; Rom.15.4; 2 Pet. 3.16). For example, it was evidently of crucial importance that the early confessional statements about Christ's death and resurrection, which Paul handed on to the Corinthians, were able to add the phrase 'in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Cor. 15.3-4). And the singular form is regularly used by writers of the NT documents to designate Scripture as a whole (e.g. John 7.38, 42; 20.9; Acts 8.32; Rom. 4.3; 9.17; Gal. 4.30; 1 Tim. 5.18; Jas 4.5; 2 Pet. 1.20). Not least striking is the fact that the almost certainly latest writing to be included in the NT (2 Peter) also regarded the letters of Paul as 'scriptures' (2 Pet. 3.16).

So, the first answer to our question is that the writers of the NT regarded the OT writings as 'scripture'. They were not alone in doing so, of course, as evidenced by the fact that both Philo and Josephus used the same plural form, 'the scriptures', to designate collectively all part of 'scripture' (Philo, *Fuga* 4; *Spec. Leg.* 1.214; Josephus, *c. Apion* 2.45). Of course, the answer has to be qualified to some extent since the OT did not yet exist as such, and the role and status of the Greek OT (LXX), which included other writings, adds a further complication. But the central elements of 'the law, the prophets and the writings' were already well established (cf. Luke 24.44) before the documents which came to be included in the NT were composed. So the first answer can stand with only some small but significant qualifications. We still cannot say, 'the Bible says', not least since the NT writers who talked about 'scripture', did not regard themselves as part of 'the Bible'. But we can say that the NT writers as a whole regarded a group of writings, more or less equivalent to the OT, as scripture, that is, as inspired by God and definitive for religion and life.

As for the NT writings themselves the question is more complex. Did they regard what they wrote as 'scripture' – that is, as having the same authority as the OT scripture? We can probably answer affirmatively in some cases – when, for example, Paul, as we might say (not entirely appropriately!) 'lays down the law' in 1 Cor. 14.37: 'Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord'. But does that apply to every instruction, every letter that Paul wrote? The fact that Paul's letter to the Laodiceans (Col. 4.16) seems to have been lost, would seem to put a questionmark against an affirmative answer. Or is the issue not so much whether the writer regarded his (no 'her', I'm afraid) writing as inspired, as whether the recipients found it inspiring – and so cherished it that it became wider known and functioned more and more as scripture?

And what about the Gospels? Since they preserve the teaching of Jesus and give accounts of his healings and interaction with Jewish leaders of his time, one might infer that they functioned effectively as 'scripture' from the first. There are several curiosities here, however. One is that in the period when recollections of the ministry and teaching of Jesus were circulated only in oral form, a most valuable collection of his teaching, used by Matthew and Luke (normally designated as Q), was not preserved as such. A probable reason for this loss of Q is that the early teachers saw it to be important to retain these memories of Jesus' teaching in a 'gospel' format

– that is, in an account of Jesus' life and teaching which climaxed in his death and resurrection. But was Q, then, not regarded as 'inspired', as 'scripture'? The issue is too confused to pursue much further, since the dimensions of Q are far from clear, as also the issues of whether we should speak of several Qs, or think of the Gospel writers as drawing on a sequence of overlapping oral traditions. But at least the relation of Q to 'scripture' helps clarify that the transition from authoritative tradition to 'scripture' is not at all as simple as Paul's letters might imply.

A second 'curiosity' is that Mark's Gospel could conceivably have shared the same fate as the Q material, in that it was almost completely 'taken over' or absorbed by Matthew and Luke. And yet it was preserved – even though indications of its influence in the second century are hard to discern; since Mark had been almost entirely absorbed by Matthew, and since Matthew was much the most influential of the NT Gospels in the second century, it is very difficult to discern distinctive Markan tradition. And yet Mark was retained and, having been accorded equal status with the others particularly by Irenaeus, became established as part of a four-Gospel canon. Certainly by the beginning of the third century the four Gospels were regarded as scripture – with other claimants to the title (the Gospel of Thomas, etc.) maintained only by a few but dismissed by most.

A third curiosity is that whereas the first three Gospels are very similar to one another (the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke), John's Gospel is very different. The difference is important, of course, since it indicates that the good news of Jesus was circulated, used and valued in different forms. But in so presenting Jesus, so differently, John in effect sailed close to the wind, and, as the controversy over John in the second century shows, there was a real question about its canonicity. Its acceptance, in effect in what became the NT canon, was of inestimable importance in helping to make clear that the good news of Jesus could be told in different ways, and in using concepts (like the Logos/Word) which must have increased the appeal of the good news to a wider audience.

Without going any further we can already see some valuable lessons and questions regarding scripture: for example, that the scope and content of scripture are unclear (Hebrew OT or Greek LXX, for a start); are the biblical writings canonical because they were inspired or because they were inspiring? should all the Gospels be evaluated and treated in the same way? And that's just for starters!

Tim Ward

The initial answer to this question can only be: how long have you got? The Bible says countless things about itself, from the grand and debated to the trivial and uncontroversial. I take it that these statement-papers are intended to be about the former, so I will dive into the deep end. What is asked for is a statement to inform a conversation, so I err on the side of holding out for discussion a simple presentation of the bases of the position that I bring.

A noticeable feature of OT religion is the role and function that words believed by Israel to have been spoken by God come to have. Of particular interest here is the role and function which those words came to have when they were written down and regarded as part of Scripture. It is evident from the OT that such words came to be thought of as mediators of God's own presence and blessing. Thus they were not just conveyors of information about God, and not just expressive of human response to

God, although at different times they were both those things. Much more richly, there were a means by which God mediated his presence and blessing.

A prime example is the Ten Commandments. When written on stone, they sat in the ark of the covenant, at the centre of the most holy place in the temple in Jerusalem. The entire structure was designed to express and symbolise the presence of God with his people, and at its heart sit written words believed to have been spoken by God. This is portrayed in a graphic way in 2 Samuel ch.6, where people's treatment of the physical ark looks like an encounter with God himself.

What is said here of the Ten Commandments also becomes true of OT law more generally. A classic expression of this is found in the longest Psalm, Ps 119. The Psalm speaks often of God's words, using a variety of terms: his laws, precepts, statutes, commands, and so on. These clearly refer to God's written word, in earlier parts of Scripture. In many of the Psalm's 176 verses a devotion is expressed to God's word which seems virtually identical with devotion to God himself. It is not that God's presence is somehow locked in some written text, but yet it does seem that his words written mediate his his presence and blessing.

What has been said so far addresses the law elements of the OT most directly, and not the prophets or other writings. However, coming to consider the NT's attitude to the OT, it is noteworthy that, from the perspective of our question, no distinction is made between law and other elements of the OT. The risen Christ teaches his disciples about how 'all the Scriptures' spoke of him, and that is said to include all the prophets and the Psalms, as well as Moses and his law (Luke 24.27, 44). Each different category of OT writing is treated by Luke and Jesus as having the same authoritative role in relation to Jesus.

The single NT verse most often quoted in this regard is itself, in context, of course referring at the time of writing most directly to the NT: 'all Scripture is God-breathed' (2 Tim. 3.16). A couple of things deserve our attention here. First is the question of what is meant by the Greek word (*theopneustos*) translated as 'inspired' in NRSV and 'God-breathed' in NIV. It is common for interpreters to take their cue from the normal uses of the English word 'inspired'. This results in a couple of different views: either that the writers of the Bible are being said to have been given particular help from God in their writing, or that the Bible they wrote has proved to have an inspiring effect on the people who read it.

These, though, ought to be judged as blind alleys. The most exhaustive work on the meaning of the word in question concludes that it refers not to the writers themselves, nor to the effects that their writing has. Instead it refers to the origin of the words themselves, and declares them to have their origin in God as their speaker/author, notwithstanding their obvious origin too in the personal actions of their authors. (And here of course lie difficult and well-trodden paths with regard to the relationship between divine and human actions.) The traditional formula sums it up: according to this verse, what the Bible says, God says.

A question naturally arises. Is this grand interpretation of what the Bible says about itself in fact based on one single verse as a proof-text - indeed, on the interpretation of just one word in that verse? A few of many examples can be given to suggest that this is not the case. Indeed, what is found in 2 Timothy 3.16 is a particularly pithy expression of what can be found throughout the Bible.

First, there are those Bible passages, often quoted in writing on this topic, which treat 'God says' and 'Scripture says' as interchangeable categories. Thus Matthew 19.4-5 quotes Genesis 2.24 as words spoken by the creator, although they occur in Genesis as part of the narrative, rather than as words from the mouth of God. Conversely, in Romans 9.17 words recorded in Exodus as spoken by God are introduced with 'Scripture says...'. There appears to be no meaningful distinction between Scripture saying something and God saying it, in these two texts.

In addition, there is a raft of different NT passages in which the writer shows clear evidence that he thinks of his writing as bearing the same authority as other Scriptures:

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul refers to the message which he preached verbally to them as 'the word of God' (2.13). In chapter 4 it becomes clear that he regards his written letter to them in the same category, since to reject an instruction he gives is to reject not a human being but God (4.8). Revelation 1.1-3 speaks of the revelation now to be given as 'from Jesus Christ', who is 'the faithful witness' (v.5).

Particularly noteworthy is 2 Peter as a whole. Whatever view one may take on the authorship of the letter, this is a letter which both speaks of previous written words of God (1.19-21), and assumes that some letters written by Paul (3.16) occupy the same category as Scripture. Moreover, the letter of 2 Peter speaks of itself in the same terms: it is a crucial apostolic reminder (1.12), and comes to form part of 'the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles' (3.2).

In a recent work, Michael Kruger concludes from these and a number of other passages that the NT writers were conscious of their apostolic authority, and (crucially) that apostolic authority bore Christ's authority.¹

There is of course a great deal more that needs to be said by way of substantiation and qualification, but this is a brief summary of my position on the question, for the purposes of on-going conversation.

¹ Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the status quo in the New Testament debate* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), p.153.

Round 2

James Dunn to Tim Ward

In reading Tim's paper my first reaction was to highlight the danger of identifying the words of the Bible too closely with the word of God conceived as fixed and unchanging and applicable to all times and circumstances.

I probably don't need to refer again to the not unimportant degree of confusion and unclarity which is introduced when speaking simply of 'the Bible', as though it was a single composition. Do we mean that all its statements were equally inspired, and therefore God's word for all and any time?

Were the writers/collectors/editors/translators of the biblical documents all equally and uniquely inspired? We should never forget that biblical words, like all words, are not units of unchanging meaning, but in combination with other words, in translation into other languages, and in different cultures and circumstances they change or develop in meaning. The differences between the Hebrew and LXX texts of the OT are a further reminder that 'the Bible' was not a static, unchanging, uniform entity. There is a fluidity and flexibility in our very core reference (the Bible) which, if we forget or ignore, is liable to result in a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of how God speaks through the Bible.

So, how do we respond to the fact that there are two, different accounts of creation (Gen. 1-2), or to the account of the flood as covering 'all the high mountains under the whole heaven' (Gen. 7.19)? Or what about God's command to 'utterly destroy' the Amalekites, men, women and children (1 Sam. 15.3), or the differing traditions in Kings and Chronicles? Is it sufficient simply to affirm that they are contained in the Bible, and therefore are 'the word of God' today? Or do we need to give more weight to historical circumstances and express 'the word of God' in relative terms? Presumably lectionaries are justified in omitting Ps. 137.9 from lectionary readings. But what does that say about the status of these words as 'word of God'? At the very least, does not the historical circumstances in which and to which such words were addressed heavily curtail their status as 'word of God'-for-all-time-and-circumstances? Am I alone in mentally modifying the words following such an OT reading in a service, from 'This is the Word of God', to 'This was the Word of God (in historical circumstances very different from our own)'?

Turning to the NT, one might well ask how justified we are in taking letters of Paul, written to a whole set of varied historical situations round the north-east quadrant of the Mediterranean in the middle of the first century, and thinking that they can be simply applied in a straightforward way to twenty-first century European congregations. No wonder that traditional churches found it more acceptable to work ecclesiastically from the Pastoral Epistles than from 1 Corinthians. And, no wonder equally, that newer churches reacting not least to deeply ingrained ecclesiastical order and tradition have found that 1 Cor. 12 has a lot more potential in its portrayal of church worship. Paul would appear to have been much more open to and supportive of women's ministry than was conventional for his day. But, even so, how could it be that generations failed to recognize the historical particularity of so many of the relevant texts and simply assume that what was said to a particular church at a particular time was 'word of God' for all time and for all circumstances? On the same subject, why does it not count as a decisive consideration that, of course

Jesus did not choose women among his twelve disciples simply because it would have been highly inappropriate to send out two single women or an unmarried man and woman when he sent his disciples out two by two?

Then there's the whole business of the Synoptic tradition, in which the same stories and teaching are often retold differently. Did the centurion come to Jesus personally (Matt. 8.5-13) or, alternatively, send some friendly Jewish elders to speak for him (Luke 7.1-10)? Clearly the same story, but told differently, with each Evangelist drawing different lessons from it. So any theory of inspiration has to take the perhaps rather limited intention of the authors/writers-down of these traditions seriously in determining how God may speak through such stories. Or take the degree of disagreement between Mark 7.1-23 and Matt. 15.1-20. Did Jesus say that nothing entering into a person is able to defile him, and was Mark justified in adding, 'cleansing all foods' (Mark 7.18-19)? Matthew certainly tones down the Markan tradition quite significantly by omitting both phrases (Matt. 15.17). Presumably each indicates how Jesus' teaching was taken in the different circumstances of what we can describe as the Gentile and Jewish missions. The point is, however, that the Jesus tradition was adapted to speak more forcefully to different situations. Which presumably also indicates that its Word of God status and function is very context-conditioned and cannot be taken too simplistically to apply to all circumstances and any time.

And what about Paul's teaching on individual laws? The law of circumcision does not seem to allow for different circumstances – 'every male' (Gen. 17.12). But Paul had no doubt that the extension to Gentile believers of God's promise to Abraham should be seen as independent of any requirement of circumcision (Rom. 4). Non-observance of the traditional Jewish food laws and consideration of the Sabbath as no different from other days were also regarded by Paul as entirely acceptable within the churches to which he wrote (Rom. 14). Was he simply rejecting so much of the OT as Word of God? Certainly he was doing so as far as its binding authority for Gentile converts was concerned. But he surely wouldn't have concluded that the OT law, or these laws in particular, should be expunged from scripture. More obviously, if he had been taking part in our conversation, he would have affirmed that their Word of God authority and binding force was limited by and to the circumstances for which they were written. But circumstances change and relevance and applicability of various scriptural texts change with the circumstances.

In thus recognizing that God may well speak to different times and circumstances differently (as in the cases noted above) we also note the importance of reading and listening to the Bible *contextually* – a hermeneutical aspect of the use and interpretation of the texts Tim cites which he seems to ignore. The unignorable consequence of reading the biblical writings alert to their historical contextuality is that, whereas fundamental doctrines and principles can be drawn from the Bible fairly straightforwardly, practical rules for conduct and community can never be read or applied without reference to the historical circumstances in which and for which they were drawn up. With the corollary, that when circumstances change the relevance or applicability of such rules to the changed circumstances cannot be taken for granted. The role of women in Christian ministry is one of the most obvious illustrations.

James Dunn to Clare Amos

Oh dear! I seem to be flogging a particular point. But it does seem to me of first importance to view the Bible in historical terms. Of course, the extent to which that affects or influences how the Bible can be seen to function today is an important question. But let's at least start by recognizing what the Bible is – a collection of writings, some of which, or the sources for which, may well go back some 3,000 years, with (almost all) the latest emerging by the end of the first century AD. What we call 'the Bible' did not exist as such till well into the Anno Domini era. Writings now in the Bible did not think of themselves as part of what we regard as the Bible. No writing now in the Bible has 'the Bible' in view. So to ask 'how the Bible speaks about itself?' is actually a meaningless question, since no biblical writing had in view, or could have in view what we mean by 'the Bible'.

Am I flogging a dead horse in all this? Perhaps. But is it not of first importance to recognize the historical character of the Bible, that is, of the different biblical writings and of their coming together to form 'the Bible'? For, apart from anything else, that reminds us of the historical contingency of the biblical writings – for example, that we cannot begin to understand them adequately unless we consider how the biblical languages were used when the biblical documents were first transcribed. We may like to think of the biblical writings as in a real sense 'timeless'. But as exegetes and expositors we understand all too well that we need to know how biblical words and idioms functioned in the days when the biblical documents were written if we are to hear them as they were intended to be heard and to do them justice. It is just that which allows and requires us to critique the way the biblical texts are used (or abused) in later centuries. The task and challenge of hermeneutics is not dissolved or resolved by any viable theory of inspiration.

I agree with Clare on the importance of there being four Gospels – though I wonder whether the three year Lectionary does justice to John (and, I note, that Mark hardly has a proper hearing, with so much of it left over to the summer!) The four Gospels, particularly John, remind us that the good news can be told in several different ways – even ways that seem contradictory at points. We may well want to say there is only one gospel. But as soon as we begin to put it into words we find that 'the gospel' can be expressed in different ways and words. That's one of the principal lessons of our four-Gospel canon. To have only one Gospel, Diatessaron or whatever, would all too quickly encourage fundamentalists to insist that there was only one way of expressing the gospel, and would restrict our proclamation of the gospel in ways that no Evangelist could agree with. Whereas the four Gospels remind us that the gospel can be and should be preached differently to different people in their different contexts – one gospel, the same gospel, but differently expressed.

We need only think of John's Gospel to take the point. Even a brief comparison between John and the Synoptics should be enough to remind us that John felt free to re-state the gospel, no doubt to reach a wider audience, in ways which make any attempt at a straightforward correlation with the Synoptics almost impossible. Apart from anything else, if Jesus had actually made all these wonderful 'I am' assertions, how could they be so absent from and ignored by the Synoptics? Evidently John was attempting to bring out the fuller significance of Jesus which had become clearer to the first Christians in the course of the first century. To insist that John's Gospel be read as though his intention was just the same as that of the Synoptists would be to

misread him, and would force the quest of the historical Jesus to engage in tortuous rationalizing explanations.

To insist that all four Gospels should be harmonized or must be harmonizable is simply to ignore the fact that they were addressed to different situations and that these situations evidently determined to some extent how the gospel should be expressed. To have concern over statements which, when removed from their historical contexts, seem to be contradictory is simply ridiculous. Once again the point is plain: to regard historical context as irrelevant or to think that the text can be adequately understood without reference to historical context will almost certainly result in misinterpretation and misapplication.

All of which simply reminds us that we should allow the biblical documents to indicate their own sphere or reference and not assume that they all speak in the same way or are all addressed to the same situation or to every situation. As historical documents, inspired and well capable of speaking with effect beyond the particular historical contexts in which and for which they were written, nonetheless the primary historical meaning of the words should almost always have some control over how they are subsequently heard. To free or excerpt them from their primary historical context (or contexts, since the roots of biblical documents may well be different from their final form) would be to lose sight of their original intention and originally intended meaning. Of course biblical documents have regularly been read outside their original contexts, but unless the original meaning has at least some control on how they are subsequently read, the danger would be that they become simply tools of later diplomacy or worse.

In short, if it is indeed the case that historical context conditions and determines the meaning intended and presumably first read from the biblical texts, which reading resulted in their being regarded as canonical, then historical context cannot and should not be ignored in any use of the text in preaching and teaching. That is not to exclude the occasions when God uses a biblical word to speak (out of historical context) to a person. But in terms of biblical authority the historical context must have a critical role in determining a biblical text's relevance and force.

Tim Ward to James Dunn

I have in front of me both Jimmy's initial piece and his first response to mine. This piece responds to both.

I agree very much with Jimmy on the basic need to interpret Scripture *contextually*. He feels that my Scripture citations ignored that principle, tending to treat individual texts as dehistoricised timeless statements. Well, fair enough. In a short piece there was not space to spell out a full grammatico-historical exegesis of each text. I would contend that if that were done, each text could legitimately be regarded as saying now what I took it to be saying. Jimmy may well disagree on a case-by-case basis, but at least we'd be having a dialogue on the basis of shared assumptions about what constitutes appropriate biblical interpretation.

Jimmy says: 'one might well ask how justified we are in taking letters of Paul, written to a whole set of varied historical situations round the north-east quadrant of the Mediterranean in the middle of the first century, and thinking that they can be simply applied in a straightforward way to twenty-first century European congregations.'

The key word there seems to me to be 'straightforward'. Of course there is plenty of bad practice to be found, in which preachers apply biblical statements out of context and unthinkingly to congregations. However, the approach I propose, and more importantly good historic practice which believes Scripture to be identical with the word of God, does no such thing. There are plenty of biblical commentaries written by very conservative evangelicals which do all the complex historical and hermeneutical work which Jimmy right insists on. He may not always agree with their individual exegetical and homiletical conclusions, but they certainly don't think that contemporary biblical application is a 'straightforward' affair.

I note, though, that at one point he says that, by contrast, 'fundamental doctrines and principles can be drawn from the Bible fairly straightforwardly'. I would want to ask the basis for distinguishing these so clearly from community practices, since in the NT they seem to run together pretty inextricably.

What I frankly wondered reading his two pieces (and I hope he will tell me straight if this is plain wrong) is whether he takes it that a text displaying any measure of historical particularity is thereby automatically disqualified from bearing for good the unqualified label 'Word of God'. Indeed it's hard to think of a text that *could* then qualify. One could respond point-by-point to the individual features he mentions - for example I don't see how a comparison of the different emphases of Mark 7.18-19 and Matthew 15.17 reveals anything which calls the classic doctrine of inspiration into question - and do so endlessly without getting very far. Every individual feature of Scripture he points to in order to question classic inspiration can find a response somewhere in conservative (and not fundamentalist) scholarship, and to each of these Jimmy would, I guess, have his own response.

It appears (and I'm happy to be told I've got this wrong - I'm just trying to get to the heart of things) that Jimmy is disposed to hold up any element of historical particularity in a text as solid evidence that that element cannot be regarded as in any sense a universal word of God.

By contrast, I am disposed to think that historical particularity is precisely what we should *expect* to find as a feature of universal revelation. I think this supremely because of the incarnation. Christianity's central distinctive is that it portrays God as a God who takes to himself one particular human nature in order to live one particular life in space and time, and in precisely in so doing is entering his creation to provide universal revelation (a man is revelation to women; a Jew is revelation to Gentiles; a young man is revelation to the old; a first-century Palestinian is revelation to people of all times and all places). It is not unreasonable to suppose that if this is true of Christ it can also be true of Scripture - not unproblematically so, of course, but still truly. (And to say this is to draw a legitimate theological inference, not to come regard Scripture as an idolatrous 'second incarnation').

A final point. Jimmy seems to say that Paul's relativising of OT law for his times gives us warrant for doing the same with some of the NT's directions. If I've understood that right, it needs to be asked on what basis we can claim this right. It would seem possible to do so only if we either strip Paul of the apostolic authority that distinguishes him from us, or assume for ourselves the same authority he had. In either case, significant consequences follow which need to be noted: in particular, on what basis has the canon been closed?

Tim Ward to Clare Amos

Jimmy's first response to Clare sets out very well a number of things that I would also want to say. The heart of it is that any serious conversation on this topic must at a very early stage take full account of the historical contexts in which scriptural texts arose. A biblical scholar will insist, as Jimmy does, that the particular circumstances in which each text was written, along with the immediate purposes for which it was written, must play some determinative role in our understanding of the nature and meaning of the text. A theologian might add that dehistoricised approaches to Scripture tend to turn Christian faith into the kind of dehistoricised, non-particular spirituality which the very particularity of divine revelation in Christ shows it ought not be.

It is of course only honest of us to elucidate our own approaches to Scripture through autobiographical reference to the influences that have shaped and continue to shape us. That is all very well, and I would have my own stories to tell. To imagine that such things have no bearing on us is indeed short-sighted; we are people, not brains on legs. But such anecdotes can only ever elucidate; they can never legitimate. It is increasingly commonplace in some Christian discourse to imagine that autobiography in fact does legitimate. Such an approach assumes an understanding of Scripture and Christian faith that in the end tends to borrow more from contemporary solipsistic positions than it does from historic Christian faith.

In this regard, I wonder what Clare means when she proposes that revelation should not be seen in propositional terms. Of course no instance of language-use is purely propositional. Even when something as apparently 'informational' is said as "It's half past three", there are personal and relational things going on (as various theological appropriations of speech act theory have taught us). However it stretches credibility somewhat to imagine that the nature of divine revelation in the life of Christ, conveyed to us in one way or another through a set of texts stuffed full of propositions, is proposition-free. There have been various theological attempts to describe Scripture (and wider Christian theology) in ways which play up their practical function and play down their propositional element. As far as I was aware, such attempts had largely come to be regarded as having presented a false dichotomy - rightly reacting against construals of Scripture which reduce it to a set of theological propositions, but stumbling over the inherently propositional aspects of language.

In this light I would like to hear more on how this point about propositionless revelation fits with the central hermeneutical role which Clare wants to give to John 20.31. There seem to be some fairly strong propositions at work in that verse.

Similarly, quite a lot of care needs to be exercised when concluding that the existence of four canonical Gospels rather than one 'says' to us that 'diversity is acceptable'. All the more ought one to be careful here since that particular term, 'diversity', is currently widely used in the West as a cipher for a very contemporary and culture-specific set of values. Of course it is right to say that the canonical tradition of four Gospels rather than one should be taken to teach us something about the diversity of ways in which Christ can be expressed. However, for quite a long time generations of faithful Christians who recognised this also thought that it could be held together with a strong sense of the unity of the Gospels. (The Trinity, after all, would put a model of unity-in-complex-diversity at the very heart of Christian thought.) If we want to say that the existence of the four teaches diversity but not a complex form of

unity, there is really quite a lot of hard historical work to be done to get beyond centuries of conviction about Scripture's unity; it cannot be cast lightly off. My questions would therefore be: just how were elements of unity and diversity in the Gospels seen to work together in the early church? What might that then mean for us? What then is the nature of the diversity which that bald feature of the NT is authorising, and what are its limits?